

Message Text

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ORIGIN SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 R

DRAFTED BY NEA:NAVELIOTES:MAR
APPROVED BY NEA:ALATHERTONJR.
S/S:O: SSTEINER

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FM SECSTATE WASHDC
TO AMEMBASSY TUNIS IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L STATE 131615

EXDIS, FOR AMBASSADOR

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, TS

SUBJECT: TUNISIAN/LIBYAN CONTINENTAL SHELF DISPUTE:
TUNISIAN POSITION UNCHANGED

REF: TUNIS 4003

1. VERY MUCH APPRECIATE YOUR URGENT EFFORTS DISCUSS MATTER
WITH SENIOR MFA OFFICIAL. WE BELIEVE, HOWEVER, THAT
UNDER CIRCUMSTANCES WE WILL HAVE TO INSIST THAT SUBJECT OF
TUNISIAN POSITION BE DISCUSSED WITH CHATTI OR NOUIRA, AS
APPROPRIATE.

2. YOU WILL HAVE RECEIVED SEPTTEL REPORTING DEVELOPMENTS IN
LONDON MEETINGS BETWEEN LIBYANS AND READING AND BATES COM-
PANY.

3. IT IS IMPORTANT FOR OUR TUNISIAN FRIENDS TO KEEP IN
MIND THE SCENARIO WHICH HAS BROUGHT US TO THIS POINT.

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ONCE THE COMPANY ENTERED THE DISPUTED ZONE, THE GOT MADE
CLEAR (1) IT WOULD NOT TOLERATE (I.E., THREAT OF ARMED
ACTION) THE SHIP IN THE AREA; AND (2) IT WOULD NEVER NEGO-
TIATE WITH THE LIBYANS UNTIL THE SHIP WITHDREW. GIVEN THE
CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER OF VIOLENCE AND POTENTIAL HARM TO
AMCIT CREW MEMBERS (AND, TO LESSER EXTENT, DAMAGE TO U.S.-

OWNED PROPERTY) AND THE CRISIS ATMOSPHERE IN TUNIS ABLY AND SINCERELY RECREATED HERE BY AMBASSADOR ALI HEDDA, WE INTERVENED IN THE MATTER. THIS LED TO OUR MEETING IN TULSA, SENATOR BARTLETT'S INTEREST, THE 10-DAY EXTENSION AND THE CURRENT MEETINGS IN LONDON, AND THE HABIB LETTER.

4. OBVIOUSLY, WE WANT TO BE AS HELPFUL AS POSSIBLE TO OUR TUNISIAN FRIENDS AND HAVE DONE OUR BEST WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE LEGITIMATE CONCERNS AND AUTHORITIES OF THE USG. IN THIS RESPECT, THE HABIB LETTER WAS AS STRONG A COMMUNICATION AS POSSIBLE, AND AN ELOQUENT TESTIMONY OF SERIOUSNESS OF OUR OFFICIAL CONCERN, GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES.

5. FOR WHATEVER REASON, HOWEVER, THE CIRCUMSTANCES HAVE CLEARLY CHANGED IN FEW DAYS SINCE HABIB LETTER SENT:

-- THE SHIP IS ON SITE AND DRILLING;

-- THE TUNISIANS APPEAR TO BE IN NEGOTIATIONS WITH LIBYANS;

-- IT IS CLEAR THERE IS NO SHORT RUN--AT LEAST IMMEDIATE-- DANGER OF TUNISIAN ARMED ACTION AGAINST THE SHIP. INDEED IT APPEARS THERE IS DE FACTO INDEFINITE EXTENSION OF 10-DAY "ULTIMATUM."

IF THE TUNISIAN AIM WAS TO HAVE SHIP REMOVED THROUGH USG PRESSURE, TIMING OF ANNOUNCING/ENGAGING IN NEGOTIATIONS COULD NOT HAVE BEEN WORSE. AND, OF COURSE, WE HAD NO IDEA WHAT WAS COMING OUT OF ARAB LEAGUE INITIATIVE. OBVIOUSLY, CONFIDENTIAL

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TUNISIANS DID KNOW AND PROBABLY KNEW (OR HOPED) WHEN THEY GRANTED 10-DAY EXTENSION OF "ULTIMATUM" TO COMPANY. WE ARE NOT SECOND GUESSING TUNISIAN DECISIONS OR MOTIVES. OBVIOUSLY, WE ALL WANT A PEACEFUL, NEGOTIATED RESOLUTION OF THE DISPUTE (WHICH, OF COURSE, WAS A MAJOR AIM OF OUR TRYING TO DISSUADE COMPANY FROM ENTERING DISPUTED ZONE IN FIRST PLACE AND ALSO A MOTIVE OF OUR SUBSEQUENT ACTION TO REMOVE SHIP).

6. RE REFTTEL, WE HAVE NO REASON TO DOUBT SINCERITY OF AMBASSADOR MEJDOUB OR FACT HE WAS ACCURATELY REFLECTING TUNISIAN POSITION RE IMMEDIATE WITHDRAWAL OF SHIP. AMBASSADOR HEDDA WOULD SUPPORT THIS VIEW, AND ADD THAT SUCH A MOVE WOULD STRENGTHEN THE TUNISIAN POSITION IN NEGOTIATIONS.

7. THE ISSUE IS NOT THE DESIRES OF THE GOT AT THIS POINT; RATHER IT IS THE BONA-FIDES AND CREDIBILITY OF THE USG IN DEALING WITH ITS OWN CITIZENS AND THE CONGRESS. GIVEN THE

FACT THAT NEGOTIATIONS APPEAR TO BE UNDER WAY, HOW CAN WE CREDIBLY ARGUE THAT THE PRESENCE OF THE RIG IS THE MAJOR INHIBITING FACTOR TO NEGOTIATIONS? ALSO, WITH THE TUNISIAN MEDIA FULL OF FAVORABLE COMMENT ON THE TALKS, LOOKING TO A PEACEFUL, NEGOTIATED SOLUTION, HOW CAN WE SAY TO READING AND BATES THAT THE SITUATION IS EXPLOSIVE OR THREATENING? IN THIS RESPECT, STRIKES US THAT COMMUNIQUE OF POLITICAL BUREAU DOES LEND ITSELF TO REASONABLE INTERPRETATION THAT GOT NOW WILLING TO ACQUIESCE IN SHIP WORKING ON SITE DUE MERE FACT THAT PORTION OF QADHAFI'S ADDRESS ALLUDING TO THIS PROBLEM IS HIGHLIGHTED IN OFFICIAL TUNISIAN PUBLIC DOCUMENT. INDEED, IT COULD BE READ AS GOT PREPARING PUBLIC FOR THIS EVENTUALITY. IN ANY EVENT, LANGUAGE OF THIS DOCUMENT CLEARLY SIGNALS THAT CRISIS IS WANING, IF NOT ALREADY PAST.

8. FINALLY, WHAT WOULD BE THE POSTURE OF THE USG AT
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HOME (AND ON THE HILL) IF WE SUCCEEDED IN PRESSING THE U.S.-OWNED RIG OUT AND LEARNED IN A FEW WEEKS THAT IT WAS REPLACED BY A FRENCH OR ITALIAN RIG WITH AT LEAST TUNISIAN ACQUIESCENCE?

9. WE HOPE FOREGOING EXPLAINS WHY WE NEED BENEFIT ASAP OF THOROUGH DISCUSSION BY YOU WITH SENIOR-MOST POLITICAL LEVEL OF GOT. WHEN WE HAVE YOUR REPORT OF THIS CONVERSATION, WE WILL HAVE TO CONSIDER PROMPTLY NATURE OF OUR REPLY TO THORNTON WHO IS STANDING BY IN LONDON. IF OUR ASSUMPTION OF CHANGED CIRCUMSTANCES IS CORRECT, CANNOT BE OPTIMISTIC DECISION WILL BE TO CONTINUE TO PRESS COMPANY TO WITHDRAW RIG PARTICULARLY IF CURRENT TUNIS MEETINGS TURN OUT TO BE BEGINNINGS OF REAL NEGOTIATIONS. IN THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, BEST POSTURE FOR GOT WOULD BE TO BE ON PUBLIC RECORD IN CONTEXT PRESS BRIEFINGS ON MEETINGS THAT IT HAD DECIDED "TO ALLOW" RIG TO CONTINUE WORKING IN LIGHT OF DEVELOPMENTS. WE LEAVE IT TO YOUR JUDGMENT, OF COURSE, IF YOU MIGHT MAKE SUCH A SUGGESTION DEPENDING ON OUTCOME YOUR DISCUSSION. VANCE

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: CONTINENTAL SHELF, DISPUTES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Sent Date: 08-Jun-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 22 May 2009
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977STATE131615
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: NAVELIOTES:MAR
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770203-0544
Format: TEL
From: STATE
Handling Restrictions:
Image Path:
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Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19770678/aaaacpxh.tel
Line Count: 159
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 2d7ba182-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ORIGIN SS
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Reference: 77 TUNIS 4003
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 22-Mar-2005 12:00:00 am
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2227171
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: TUNISIAN/LIBYAN CONTINENTAL SHELF DISPUTE: TUNISIAN POSITION UNCHANGED
TAGS: PFOR, PLOS, TS, LY
To: TUNIS
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/2d7ba182-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009